THE ART OF SHELL ORNAMENTS MAKING IN THE ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLAND

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DECLARATION BY THE STUDENT

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in this dissertation entitled "**The Art of Shell Ornaments making in the Andaman and Nicobar Island.**" in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Masters of Fine Arts in Painting** is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the period from **February 2025** to **April 2025** under the supervision **Mr. Anujeet Chatterjee** Department of **Fine Arts and Design**.

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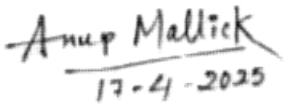

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Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, nestled in the Bay of Bengal, are known for their pristine beaches, rich marine biodiversity, and vibrant indigenous cultures. Among the many traditional crafts practiced by the island communities, the art of shell ornament making holds a special place. This age-old craft reflects the islanders' deep connection with the sea and their remarkable skill in transforming natural materials into objects of beauty and cultural significance. Shells, abundant along the shores, are collected, cleaned, and intricately crafted into ornaments such as necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and decorative items. These creations are not just aesthetic expressions but also carry cultural meanings, often used in rituals, community gatherings, and as symbols of identity. The craft is particularly prominent among the Nicobarese and other local communities, passed down through generations. Over time, shell ornament making has also become an important part of the local economy, contributing to both livelihoods and tourism. However, the industry faces challenges due to environmental regulations, overharvesting, and competition from mass-produced items. Despite these hurdles, the art continues to survive through the dedication of local artisans and efforts to preserve traditional knowledge. This study explores the history, techniques, cultural significance, and contemporary status of shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, shedding light on a unique artistic tradition rooted in nature and heritage.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a union territory of India located in the southeastern part of the Bay of Bengal, are renowned for their ecological richness, ethnic diversity, and unique traditions. These islands are home to several indigenous communities such as the Nicobarese, Shompens, and other tribes, many of whom have sustained their cultural identity through art and craft traditions passed down through generations. Among these, shell ornament making stands out as a deeply rooted practice that symbolizes the intricate relationship between nature and culture in the island life. Shells—particularly those of marine mollusks—are found in abundance along the coastlines of these islands. Over centuries, the islanders have mastered the technique of transforming these natural elements into beautiful and meaningful ornaments. This craft involves a high level of skill, patience, and creativity. Each ornament reflects the artisan's knowledge of design, material properties, and traditional aesthetics. Shell ornament making is not just a craft; it is an expression of identity and tradition. In many communities, shell ornaments play a vital role in rituals, festivals, and social ceremonies. For example, in Nicobarese weddings and tribal gatherings, shell jewelry is often worn as a symbol of beauty, wealth, or status. The shells used—such as conch, cowrie, or turbo—are selected carefully based on size, color, texture, and symbolic meaning. This traditional craft also has economic

significance. In recent decades, shell ornaments have become popular among tourists visiting the islands, creating a small-scale cottage industry that supports local livelihoods. Emporiums. In some areas, especially in the Nicobar Islands, entire families are engaged in this activity, contributing to both cultural continuity and income generation. However, this art form faces several challenges. The increasing demand for shell products has led to concerns about overharvesting, which can negatively impact marine ecosystems. Additionally, modern influences and the availability of mass-produced fashion jewelry have created stiff competition for traditional artisans. Government regulations on the collection of certain protected shell species have also affected raw material availability. Despite these pressures, efforts are being made to preserve and promote the craft through government initiatives, NGOs, and cultural organizations. The art of shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, therefore, is not only a testament to the creativity of its people but also a reflection of their harmonious coexistence with the natural world. This study delves into the historical evolution, cultural symbolism, materials and techniques, economic impact, and sustainability challenges of shell ornament making, offering a comprehensive understanding of this unique and valuable tradition.

Chapter 1: Cultural and Historical Background of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, are a group of islands known for their natural beauty, cultural richness, and traditional crafts. These islands are divided into two major groups: the Andaman Islands in the north and the Nicobar Islands in the south. Together, they form a unique part of India, both geographically and culturally. These islands are home to several tribal communities who have lived here for thousands of years. Some of the major tribes include the Great Andamanese, Jarawas, Shompens, Onges, and Nicobarese. These communities follow traditional lifestyles, relying on nature for their daily needs. Their way of life is deeply connected to the forests, the sea, and the land around them. One of the most notable cultural practices among these communities is the art of making ornaments from seashells. This tradition has been passed down through generations and remains a valuable part of the islanders' identity. Shell ornament making is not just a form of decoration—it reflects the history, beliefs, and values of the people who make and wear them. The coastal environment of the islands makes it easy to find various types of shells. After the tide goes out, shells of different shapes, sizes, and colors are left behind on the beaches. Islanders collect these shells with care, making sure not to harm living creatures. Once collected, the shells are cleaned and prepared to be used in making jewelry such as necklaces, earrings, bangles, and anklets.

Figure 1: Shells necklaces, earrings, bangles, and anklets

Each shell ornament carries cultural meaning. Some are believed to bring good luck, while others are used in special ceremonies such as weddings, festivals, or community gatherings. The designs are often inspired by nature and may include patterns that resemble waves, plants, or animals. These ornaments are not only worn as accessories but are also seen as symbols of tradition and community pride.

The knowledge of making shell ornaments is traditionally shared within families. Elders teach the younger generation through observation and practice. Children grow up watching their parents and grandparents at work, slowly learning the steps involved. Over time, they develop the skills needed to continue the craft. This informal learning process helps preserve the tradition across generations.

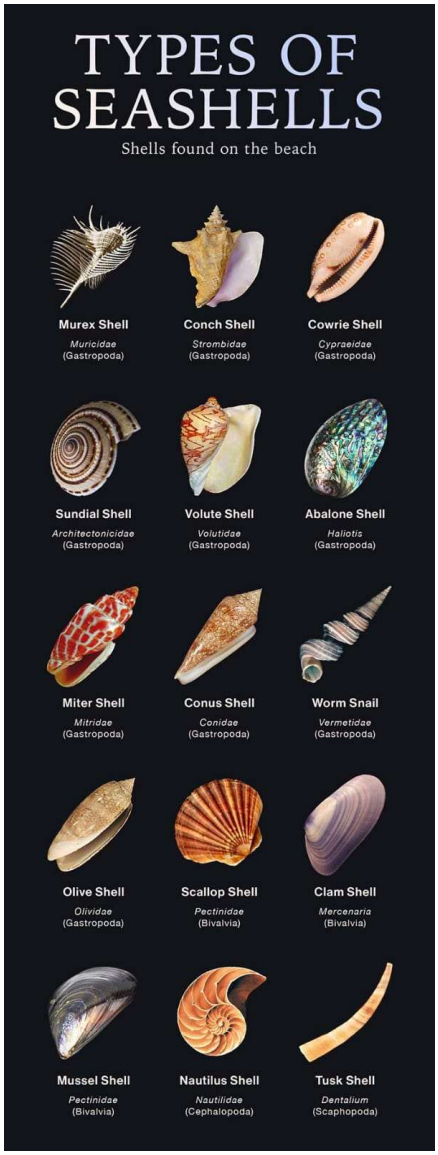

Figure 2: Types of Sea Shells

Although the islands were isolated for many years, outside contact began during colonial times and increased during the British rule and World War II. These changes brought new tools and materials that helped improve the quality of shell ornaments. Even so, the islanders continued to follow their traditional methods and used locally available shells to make their jewelry.

The people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have always respected nature. They believe in using natural resources carefully and without waste. Shell collection is done only when shells are naturally available, showing the people's deep understanding of and respect for the environment. This harmony between human activity and nature is one of the key features of shell ornament making.

Figure 3: Fresh Raw Melon sea Shells

Today, shell ornament making remains an active and living tradition. Even with modern influences and growing tourism, many communities still practice this art using traditional methods. These ornaments are also sold in local markets and are popular among tourists, but for the local people, they carry cultural and emotional value.

Figure 4: Dry Unpolished Shells

The art of shell ornament making reflects the close relationship between the islanders and their natural surroundings. It represents more than just beauty—it is a part of their life, history, and identity. In the next chapter, we will look more closely at the tools and materials used in this traditional craft.

Chapter 2: Materials and Tools Used in Shell Ornament Making

The art of shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands depends greatly on the natural materials found in the region. Among all the materials used, seashells are the most important. These shells are collected from the beaches and shallow waters surrounding the islands. The wide variety of shells found here makes the ornaments diverse in shape, size, and design.

Figure 5: Tools Used in Shell Ornament Making

Shells used for making ornaments usually come from marine animals like oysters, conchs, snails, and clams. These animals leave behind their hard shells after they die, and the empty shells are then washed up on the shore by the waves. Islanders often collect these shells early in the morning or after high tide, choosing only the ones that are empty and not harming any living sea creatures in the process. This careful method of collection shows the traditional respect the local people have for the environment.

Once collected, the shells are cleaned using fresh water to remove sand, dirt, and any remaining organic matter. Sometimes, the shells are boiled to make them easier to clean and to remove any bad smells. After cleaning, the shells are dried under the sun. The drying process helps strengthen the shells and prepares them for shaping and designing.

After the shells are cleaned and dried, the next step involves shaping and polishing them. The tools used in this process are usually simple and traditional. Some families use small knives, cutters, hammers, and grinding stones to shape the shells into smooth pieces. In recent times, a few modern tools like hand drills or files are also used, especially when creating holes for

threading. However, in most rural areas, the process is still carried out by hand using basic tools passed down through generations

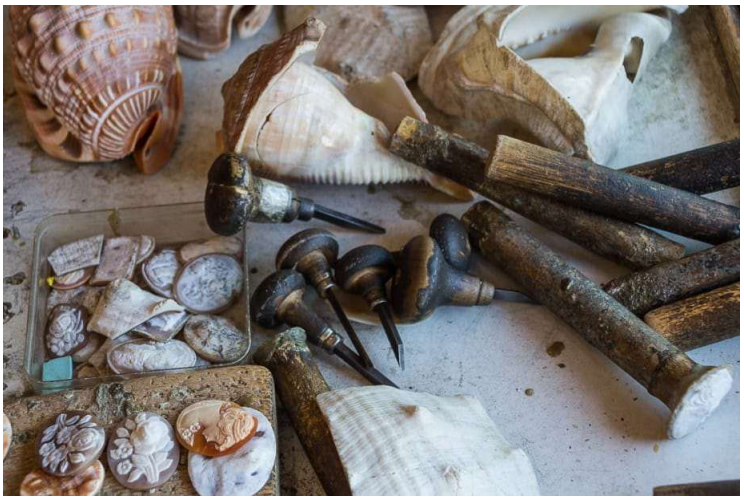

Figure 6: Curving tools

To polish the shells and give them a smooth, shiny surface, sandpaper or small polishing stones are used. Polishing brings out the natural color and texture of the shells, making each piece unique. Some shells have bright colors, while others are more plain but elegant. The polishing stage is important because it gives the final product a beautiful and finished look.

Thread, wire, and natural fibers are also essential materials in making shell ornaments. Once the shells are ready, they are often joined together using cotton threads, nylon strings, or even thin metal wires. In traditional communities, natural plant fibers are still used to keep the process eco-friendly. Sometimes, wooden beads or small stones are added to improve the design or balance of the ornaments.

Colour is another element that is sometimes added, though not always. Some artisans paint the shells with natural dyes or bright colors, while others prefer to leave them in their natural state. The decision depends on the maker's style and the purpose of the ornament. For sacred or traditional use, natural shells are preferred. For decorative or commercial pieces, color may be added to attract customers. Each tool and material plays a special role in the making of shell ornaments. What makes this craft unique is how the islanders use simple resources with skill and creativity. Even without machines or expensive tools, they manage to produce attractive and meaningful ornaments that reflect their culture and environment.

The materials and tools used in shell ornament making are closely linked to nature and tradition. Shells collected from the sea, shaped with basic tools, and joined with natural threads or fibers come together to form items of beauty and cultural value. In the next chapter, we will explore how these ornaments are made step by step and what techniques are used during the process.

Chapter 3: Techniques of Shell Ornament Making

The process of making shell ornaments in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a careful and creative craft. This traditional art is not only about using materials but also about how these materials are shaped, combined, and turned into beautiful designs. The techniques used in this process have been passed down from one generation to another and continue to be an important part of local culture.

The first step in making shell ornaments is selecting the right shells. Not all shells are suitable for making jewelry. The size, thickness, color, and shape of the shell must be checked. Shells with cracks or weak spots are usually avoided. The artisan selects shells that are strong, smooth, and attractive. Often, different types of shells are chosen depending on the kind of ornament that is to be made,large shells may be used for necklaces, while small ones are ideal for earrings or bangles.

Figure 7: Making Shells Ornaments

After selection, the shells are cleaned and dried, as described in the previous chapter. The next step is shaping. Shaping the shell is one of the most important and delicate parts of the process. Artisans use small tools like knives, files, and cutters to shape the shell pieces. Some shells are cut into round, oval, or triangular pieces. Others are left in their natural form, especially if they have a special or beautiful appearance.

Once the shells are shaped, holes are made in them. These holes allow the shells to be joined together using thread or wire. Traditionally, a sharp pointed tool or small hand drill is used to make the holes. This step requires steady hands and patience, as shells can break easily if too much pressure is applied.

After the shells are shaped and drilled, they are polished. Polishing helps smooth out the surface and make the shell shine. This step is often done with sandpaper, polishing stones, or even pieces of cloth. The polishing time may vary depending on the type of shell. Some shells already have a glossy surface and need only a little polishing. Others need more work to bring out their natural beauty.

Figure 8: Shell Grinding

Now the shells are ready to be arranged into ornaments. This part of the process depends on the creativity and experience of the artisan. The shells are laid out in a design before joining them. Some designs are simple, while others are complex. In some cases, shells are combined with other natural materials like seeds, beads, stones, or pieces of wood to create a richer look.

The joining of the shells is done using threads, wires, or natural fibers. The pieces are tied or connected one by one to form the final ornament. Necklaces, bracelets, earrings, headbands, and anklets are the most commonly made items. Each finished ornament is checked for strength and appearance. If needed, extra polishing or fixing is done before the item is considered complete.

One of the most special things about this craft is that each artisan has their own style. Even if two people use the same materials, their designs may look very different. The knowledge of patterns, color balance, and combinations grows with experience. Many artisans do not draw the designs on paper but make them directly from memory or imagination.

In some cases, ornaments are made for traditional events or rituals. These pieces may follow specific designs that are meaningful in the community. For example, during festivals or

weddings, women may wear certain types of shell ornaments that symbolize beauty, status, or blessings.

The techniques of shell ornament making involve patience, skill, and creativity. From selecting the shells to polishing and assembling them, each step is done with care and respect for the material. These techniques show how a simple natural object can be transformed into something beautiful and culturally important.

Chapter 4: Cultural Meanings and Symbolism of Shell Ornaments

Shell ornaments are more than just decorations in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. For the island communities, these ornaments carry deep cultural meanings and are symbols of tradition, belief, and identity. Each shell, shape, and design tells a story. These ornaments are part of the lives of the people, used in important events and everyday life. They express emotions, roles in society, and connections to nature and the spiritual world.

Figure 9: Shells Ornament Old and Morden models

One of the main reasons people wear shell ornaments is to show beauty and identity. Both men and women wear different types of shell jewelry, such as necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and belts. These items are often handmade and reflect the wearer's personality or status. For example, young women may wear bright and finely designed ornaments that show beauty and elegance. Older women may wear more traditional or heavier ornaments that show respect and wisdom. In some communities, men wear shell jewelry during dances or ceremonies to show strength and pride.

Shell ornaments are also used for spiritual and protective purposes. Many communities believe that certain shells have powers to protect the wearer from bad luck, illness, or evil spirits. Some ornaments are worn especially during dangerous journeys, illness, or important events. Shells like cowries or conches are often linked with fertility, healing, and blessings from nature. These beliefs are passed down through generations, and many people still respect and follow these customs today.

During festivals and traditional rituals, shell ornaments play an important role. They are worn in weddings, dances, and seasonal celebrations. In a wedding, the bride and groom may wear special shell ornaments made by family members. These pieces are not just for decoration but also for blessings. They are believed to bring peace, happiness, and good fortune to the new

couple. In other festivals, community members wear matching ornaments to show unity and cultural pride.

Dances and music events often include shell ornaments that make sound when the person moves. These ornaments are tied to the arms, waist, or legs. As the dancer moves, the shells create a rhythmic sound that adds to the music. This connection between movement, sound, and shells shows how the ornaments are part of storytelling and expression in tribal performances.

Shell ornaments are also linked to age and gender. Children may wear small and simple shell ornaments, often given by parents or elders. As they grow older, they begin to wear more detailed and meaningful pieces. For men and women, there are different styles and symbols. For instance, women may wear shells shaped like flowers, stars, or circles, while men might wear rougher or stronger-looking designs. These differences help show the role and position of each person in the community.

Many traditional stories are connected to shells and shell ornaments. Elders often tell tales about how shells were gifts from the sea or how they protected ancestors during hard times. Some stories explain how wearing a particular shell brings wisdom, courage, or love. These stories help young people understand the deeper meanings behind the ornaments and why they should be respected.

Today, even though modern jewelry is available, many people still value traditional shell ornaments. They wear them during cultural events and keep them as family treasures. Some even pass them down as heirlooms from parents to children. These ornaments are a way of remembering the past and showing pride in their heritage.

Shell ornaments in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are full of cultural and symbolic meaning. They are not just art but also carry beliefs, stories, and emotions. They connect the people to nature, to each other, and to their traditions. Wearing and making these ornaments is a way to celebrate identity, show respect, and keep cultural roots alive. They are living symbols of the rich and beautiful culture of the island communities.

Chapter 5: Role in Economy and Livelihood

Shell ornament making plays a very important role in the economy and daily life of many people in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. For local communities, especially those living near the coast, this traditional craft is not just a cultural activity but also a major way to earn a living. Over the years, as tourism has increased, the demand for shell ornaments has grown. Today, tourism is one of the main reasons why many families continue to make and sell shell ornaments.

Most of the shell ornaments are handmade by local artisans who collect shells from the beaches. These artisans, many of whom are women, create necklaces, earrings, bangles, anklets, and other decorative items. The work is done using simple tools, and the skills are often passed down from older generations. In many villages, this work is done at home, where family members work together. This allows people, especially women, to earn income while also taking care of their families.

Sagarekha emporium
A UNIQUE HASTHKALA BHAVAN
Below Axis Bank, Miduna Tower, 5-Middle Point
112, M.G. Road, Port Blair, S-Andaman Call : 230332
Sea Shell, Wood, Pearl, Gem Stones
Original Rudraksh and Rasi Stones
Figure 10: Government emporium in Vijaypuram, Andaman

Tourists who visit the islands are usually very interested in buying items that are made locally. Shell ornaments are one of the most popular choices because they are light, easy to carry, affordable, and beautiful. Many tourists like to take them home as souvenirs, while others buy them as gifts. This creates a steady demand for the ornaments, especially during tourist seasons. Local markets, craft fairs, and even small roadside stalls sell these ornaments, bringing regular income to the people involved.

In recent years, some NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) and government departments have started supporting local artisans. They provide training in better techniques, offer tools and materials, and help organize exhibitions and sales events. This support helps artisans improve their products and reach bigger markets. Some artisans have even begun selling their

products online or through eco-tourism centers. These steps have helped increase earnings and bring more recognition to their work.

Shell ornament making also provides employment in related areas. People are involved in collecting, cleaning, sorting, and polishing shells. Others help in packaging and selling. Small groups or cooperatives sometimes work together to make the production process more organized. This creates a network of workers, all depending on this traditional craft for their income.

Figure 11: Local Shells shop in Shaheed Dweep

Figure 12: Local Shells shop in Swaraj Dweep

However, there are also challenges. The rise in tourism has increased the demand for shells, and this sometimes leads to over-collection from beaches and the sea. This can harm marine life and the environment. Also, some shops sell machine-made or factory-produced ornaments that look similar but are cheaper. This affects the earnings of local artisans who work by hand. In some cases, middlemen or shop owners take a big share of the profits, leaving little for the actual makers.

To solve these problems, fair trade practices are needed. Artisans should be paid fairly for their work, and buyers should be informed about handmade and authentic products. Sustainable shell collection is also important. Collecting only empty or broken shells, and avoiding live shell harvesting, will help protect nature while allowing the craft to continue. Some groups are now spreading awareness about ethical practices in both production and buying.

Education and training can also help artisans improve their designs and meet the changing tastes of tourists. Learning about packaging, pricing, and customer preferences will help them grow their business. Government support through policies, financial aid, and recognition in cultural festivals can also make a big difference in their livelihoods.

Shell ornament making is an important source of income and livelihood in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Tourism has helped keep the craft alive by creating a strong market for handmade shell jewelry. With better support, fair practices, and care for the environment, this traditional craft can continue to support many families and also keep the culture of the islands alive.

Chapter 6: Impact of Modernization and Tourism

Modernization and tourism have brought many changes to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These changes have affected the traditional art of shell ornament making in both good and bad ways. While tourism has increased the demand for shell ornaments and helped artisans earn income, modernization has also brought challenges to the traditional way of life and the environment.

One of the positive effects of tourism is the increased visibility of local crafts. Tourists are often interested in buying handmade items that are unique to the place they visit. Shell ornaments made by local artisans attract many visitors because of their beauty and cultural value. As more tourists come to the islands, more people learn about the craft, which helps in keeping the tradition alive. It also creates job opportunities and brings income to many families who depend on this work.

Tourism has also encouraged some artisans to improve their skills and designs. Many have started to use new tools and techniques to make better-quality ornaments. They now experiment with new shapes, colors, and styles that appeal to modern buyers. This change has helped artisans sell their products not just to tourists but also in city markets and through online platforms. Some even get invited to exhibitions and fairs outside the islands to show and sell their work.

However, modernization has also brought some negative effects. One major concern is the overuse of natural resources. As the demand for shell ornaments grows, more shells are collected from the sea and beaches. This can harm marine life and upset the balance of the environment. If shells are taken in large numbers or collected while still alive, it can damage the natural beauty and health of the islands.

Another challenge is the loss of traditional designs and methods. To match modern tastes, some artisans have started copying machine-made products or using artificial materials. These changes may help sell more products, but they also lead to a loss of cultural identity. Young people, influenced by modern trends, may not feel interested in learning the traditional ways of shell ornament making. This puts the future of the craft at risk.

With modernization, many people are also moving to other jobs, especially in the tourism or service sectors. Shell ornament making, which requires patience and skill, may seem less attractive compared to jobs that offer faster income. As a result, fewer young people are taking up the craft, and the knowledge that once passed from generation to generation is slowly disappearing.

There is also the problem of competition from cheap, factory-made ornaments. These look similar to handmade ones but are made quickly in large numbers and sold at lower prices. Tourists who are not aware of the difference may buy the cheaper ones, which affects the earnings of true artisans. This can be very discouraging for local makers who put hard work into their products.

To protect the craft, there are some efforts being made. Schools and cultural centers are trying to teach children about traditional arts and crafts. Workshops are being held to train young artisans and help them improve their skills. NGOs and government programs are also promoting eco-friendly practices, like collecting only empty shells and protecting marine life. These actions are important to keep both the environment and the culture safe.

Modernization and tourism have had both positive and negative impacts on shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. While they have opened new markets and brought income to artisans, they have also brought challenges like resource overuse, cultural loss, and unfair competition. To protect this valuable craft, it is important to support local artisans, promote sustainable practices, and encourage young people to learn and continue the tradition. With the right balance, the craft of shell ornament making can survive and grow even in the modern world.

Chapter 7: Preservation and Promotion of the Craft

Shell ornament making is a traditional art that has been part of the culture of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for many years. But due to modernization and environmental challenges, this craft is slowly disappearing. To protect and promote this valuable tradition, many steps are needed. These efforts can help ensure that future generations continue to learn, respect, and practice this beautiful form of handmade art.

One of the most important steps in preserving the craft is creating awareness among young people. Many young members of the island communities are not learning the traditional methods of shell ornament making. They often move toward modern jobs and do not see this craft as valuable. Schools and community centers can help by teaching students about their own culture and traditional crafts. Workshops, craft classes, and storytelling from elders can create interest among the youth and help pass on the skills.

Education plays a key role not just in learning the craft, but also in understanding how it connects to culture, nature, and history. If young people are taught the meaning and value of shell ornaments, they are more likely to continue the practice. They can also learn to mix tradition with modern design ideas, creating new products that attract both local and global markets.

Another way to promote the craft is through museums, cultural festivals, and exhibitions. These events allow artisans to showcase their work and share their stories. Cultural programs that include traditional dance, music, and crafts help create pride in local identity. Tourists and visitors can also learn more about the background of shell ornament making and understand why it is important to preserve it. Museums can display old designs, tools, and photographs to show the history and journey of the craft.

Government and non-government organizations (NGOs) can also support this tradition by giving financial aid, training programs, and platforms to sell handmade items. They can help artisans get access to better tools and materials, and also teach them marketing and business skills. By setting up small cooperative groups or self-help groups, artisans can work together, share resources, and improve their earnings. Government departments can also offer special certificates or labels to products that are handmade and eco-friendly. This helps buyers recognize the value of traditional work.

Sustainable shell collection is another important step. To protect the environment, artisans and shell collectors must be trained to collect shells in ways that do not harm marine life. Collecting only empty or broken shells and avoiding live collection is a responsible practice. This not only protects nature but also helps keep the craft alive without causing damage to the ecosystem. Local laws and guidelines should be followed to ensure that shell collection does not become harmful.

Social media and online platforms can also help promote the craft. By posting pictures and videos of artisans at work, the beauty and value of shell ornaments can reach a wider audience. Online selling allows artisans to connect with buyers from other parts of India and even other countries. This brings new opportunities and motivates younger generations to take the craft seriously.

Finally, promoting shell ornament making also means respecting the cultural and spiritual meanings behind it. Artisans should be encouraged to continue using traditional symbols, designs, and methods

while also being free to innovate. Cultural pride, respect for nature, and community support all play a role in keeping this craft alive.

The preservation and promotion of shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands require combined efforts from individuals, communities, schools, government, and NGOs. By creating awareness, supporting artisans, protecting naature, and spreading knowledge, this rich and beautiful tradition can continue to shine for years to come.

Conclusion

The art of shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a remarkable blend of natural resourcefulness, cultural expression, and traditional craftsmanship. Rooted deeply in the lives of the island communities, particularly among the Nicobarese and other indigenous groups, this craft represents a unique symbiosis between nature and human creativity. From collecting raw shells to shaping, polishing, and turning them into meaningful ornaments, each step reflects a deep understanding of local ecology and inherited knowledge passed down through generations.

More than just decorative objects, shell ornaments carry cultural, social, and sometimes even spiritual significance within the island communities. They are worn during festivals, exchanged during important ceremonies, and often serve as indicators of social status and identity. Over time, this traditional art has also evolved into a source of livelihood for many islanders, especially with the rise of tourism and interest in indigenous crafts.

However, the survival of this art is increasingly challenged by environmental concerns, overharvesting, regulatory restrictions, and the influence of modern, mass-produced alternatives. These challenges make it essential to find a balance between preserving traditional practices and ensuring sustainable use of marine resources.

Preservation of the art of shell ornament making is not only important for cultural heritage but also for promoting eco-friendly livelihoods and sustainable tourism in the islands. With proper support, training, and recognition, this ancient craft can continue to flourish, offering both economic opportunities and a deeper appreciation of the cultural and natural wealth of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Research Achievements and Outcomes

Through the course of this dissertation, several significant outcomes have been achieved:

1. **Cultural Documentation:** This study has contributed to the documentation of a traditional craft that is often underrepresented in mainstream academic research. It captures the rich cultural heritage, symbolic meaning, and artistic value of shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

2. **Understanding of Traditional Techniques:** The research has explored and analyzed the techniques, tools, and processes used by local artisans, offering insights into the indigenous knowledge systems and craftsmanship passed down through generations.

3. **Highlighting Socio-economic Importance:** The dissertation has identified the economic role of shell ornament making in the lives of island communities, especially in relation to tourism and small-scale handicraft industries. It highlights how this craft provides employment and supports livelihoods, especially for women and tribal artisans.

4. **Identifying Challenges and Solutions:** By examining environmental concerns, government regulations, and the impact of modernization, this study sheds light on the challenges faced by the craft today. It also suggests possible strategies for sustainable development and preservation of the art form.

5. **Awareness and Appreciation:** This research brings greater awareness to a unique cultural practice that reflects the identity, environment, and history of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It encourages appreciation for indigenous art forms and supports their inclusion in cultural conservation policies.

6. **Foundation for Future Research:** This dissertation can serve as a foundation for further studies in related areas such as marine-based crafts, sustainable artisanal industries, tribal art, or cultural tourism development in island communities.

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Figure 1: ShellWala.com (Website), *Shells necklaces, earrings, bangles, and anklets* (Digital Image) , https://shellwala.com/product/shell-bracelets/83

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Figure 6: Milesgeek. (Website).*Curving tools* (Digital Image), https://www.milesgeek.com/many-faces-ancient-art-cameo-making/

Figure 9: Medium, (Website). *Shells Ornament Old and Morden models*

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Etsy https://www.etsy.com/in-en/market/andaman_beach

Figure 10: kfntravelgurde (Website). https://images.app.goo.gl/PiBC8Pjxh9ov4uQ58

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- Rajan, G. (2024, November 12) Face to face interview.
- Sarkar, B. (2024, November 16) Face to face interview

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Chapter 1: Cultural and Historical Background of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, are a group of islands known for their natural beauty, cultural richness, and traditional crafts. These islands are divided into two major groups: the Andaman Islands in the north and the Nicobar Islands in the south. Together, they form a unique part of India, both geographically and culturally.

These islands are home to several tribal communities who have lived here for thousands of years. Some of the major tribes include the Great Andamanese, Jarawas, Shompens, Onges, and Nicobarese. These communities follow traditional lifestyles, relying on nature for their daily needs. Their way of life is deeply connected to the forests, the sea, and the land around them.

One of the most notable cultural practices among these communities is the art of making ornaments from seashells. This tradition has been passed down through generations and remains a valuable part of the islanders' identity. Shell ornament making is not just a form of decoration—it reflects the history, beliefs, and values of the people who make and wear them.

The coastal environment of the islands makes it easy to find various types of shells. After the tide goes out, shells of different shapes, sizes, and colors are left behind on the beaches. Islanders collect these shells with care, making sure not to harm living creatures. Once collected, the shells are cleaned and prepared to be used in making jewelry such as necklaces, earrings, bangles, and anklets.

Each shell ornament carries cultural meaning. Some are believed to bring good luck, while others are used in special ceremonies such as weddings, festivals, or community gatherings. The designs are often inspired by nature and may include patterns that resemble waves, plants, or animals. These ornaments are not only worn as accessories but are also seen as symbols of tradition and community pride.

The knowledge of making shell ornaments is traditionally shared within families. Elders teach the younger generation through observation and practice. Children grow up watching their parents and grandparents at work, slowly learning the steps involved. Over time, they develop the skills needed to continue the craft. This informal learning process helps preserve the tradition across generations.

Although the islands were isolated for many years, outside contact began during colonial times and increased during the British rule and World War II. These changes brought new tools and materials that helped improve the quality of shell ornaments. Even so, the islanders continued to follow their traditional methods and used locally available shells to make their jewelry.

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Chapter 2: Materials and Tools Used in Shell Ornament Making

The art of shell ornament making in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands depends greatly on the natural materials found in the region. Among all the materials used, seashells are the most important. These shells are collected from the beaches and shallow waters surrounding the islands. The wide variety of shells found here makes the ornaments diverse in shape, size, and design.

Shells used for making ornaments usually come from marine animals like oysters, conchs, snails, and clams. These animals leave behind their hard shells after they die, and the empty shells are then washed up on the shore by the waves. Islanders often collect these shells early in the morning or after high tide, choosing only the ones that are empty and not harming any living sea creatures in the process. This careful method of collection shows the traditional respect the local people have for the environment.

Once collected, the shells are cleaned using fresh water to remove sand, dirt, and any remaining organic matter. Sometimes, the shells are boiled to make them easier to clean and to remove any bad smells. After cleaning, the shells are dried under the sun. The drying process helps strengthen the shells and prepares them for shaping and designing.

After the shells are cleaned and dried, the next step involves shaping and polishing them. The tools used in this process are usually simple and traditional. Some families use small knives, cutters, hammers, and grinding stones to shape the shells into smooth pieces. In recent times, a few modern tools like hand drills or files are also used, especially when creating holes for threading. However, in most rural areas, the process is still carried out by hand using basic tools passed down through generations.

To polish the shells and give them a smooth, shiny surface, sandpaper or small polishing stones are used. Polishing brings out the natural color and texture of the shells, making each piece unique. Some shells have bright colors, while others are more plain but elegant. The polishing stage is important because it gives the final product a beautiful and finished look.

Thread, wire, and natural fibers are also essential materials in making shell ornaments. Once the shells are ready, they are often joined together using cotton threads, nylon strings, or even thin metal wires. In traditional communities, natural plant fibers are still used to keep the process eco-friendly. Sometimes, wooden beads or small stones are added to improve the design or balance of the ornaments.

Color is another element that is sometimes added, though not always. Some artisans paint the shells with natural dyes or bright colors, while others prefer to leave them in their natural state. The decision depends on the maker's style and the purpose of the ornament. For sacred or traditional use, natural shells are preferred.

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Chapter 3: Techniques of Shell Ornament Making

The process of making shell ornaments in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a careful and creative craft. This traditional art is not only about using materials but also about how these materials are shaped, combined, and turned into beautiful designs. The techniques used in this process have been passed down from one generation to another and continue to be an important part of local culture.

The first step in making shell ornaments is selecting the right shells. Not all shells are suitable for making jewelry. The size, thickness, color, and shape of the shell must be checked. Shells with cracks or weak spots are usually avoided. The artisan selects shells that are strong, smooth, and attractive. Often, different types of shells are chosen depending on the kind of ornament that is to be made;large shells may be used for necklaces, while small ones are ideal for earrings or bangles.

After selection, the shells are cleaned and dried, as described in the previous chapter. The next step is shaping. Shaping the shell is one of the most important and delicate parts of the process. Artisans use small tools like knives, files, and cutters to shape the shell pieces. Some shells are cut into round, oval, or triangular pieces. Others are left in their natural form, especially if they have a special or beautiful appearance.

Once the shells are shaped, holes are made in them. These holes allow the shells to be joined together using thread or wire. Traditionally, a sharp pointed tool or small hand drill is used to make the holes. This step requires steady hands and patience, as shells can break easily if too much pressure is applied.

After the shells are shaped and drilled, they are polished. Polishing helps smooth out the surface and make the shell shine. This step is often done with sandpaper, polishing stones, or even pieces of cloth. The polishing time may vary depending on the type of shell. Some shells already have a glossy surface and need only a little polishing. Others need more work to bring out their natural beauty.

Now the shells are ready to be arranged into ornaments. This part of the process depends on the creativity and experience of the artisan. The shells are laid out in a design before joining them. Some designs are simple, while others are complex. In some cases, shells are combined with other natural materials like seeds, beads, stones, or pieces of wood to create a richer look.

The joining of the shells is done using threads, wires, or natural fibers. The pieces are tied or connected one by one to form the final ornament. Necklaces, bracelets, earrings, headbands, and anklets are the most commonly made items. Each finished ornament is checked for strength and appearance. If needed, extra polishing or fixing is done before the item is considered complete.

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Chapter 4: Cultural Meanings and Symbolism of Shell Ornaments

Shell ornaments are more than just decorations in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. For the island communities, these ornaments carry deep cultural meanings and are symbols of tradition, belief, and identity. Each shell, shape, and design tells a story. These ornaments are part of the lives of the people, used in important events and everyday life. They express emotions, roles in society, and connections to nature and the spiritual world.

Figure 9: Shells Ornament Old and Morden models

One of the main reasons people wear shell ornaments is to show beauty and identity. Both men and women wear different types of shell jewelry, such as necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and belts. These items are often handmade and reflect the wearers personality or status. For example, young women may wear bright and finely designed ornaments that show beauty and elegance. Older women may wear more traditional or heavier ornaments that show respect and wisdom. In some communities, men wear shell jewelry during dances or ceremonies to show strength and pride.

Shell ornaments are also used for spiritual and protective purposes. Many communities believe that certain shells have powers to protect the wearer from bad luck, illness, or evil spirits. Some ornaments are worn especially during dangerous journeys, illness, or important events. Shells like cowries or conches are often linked with fertility, healing, and blessings from nature. These beliefs are passed down through generations, and many people still respect and follow these customs today.

During festivals and traditional rituals, shell ornaments play an important role. They are worn in weddings, dances, and seasonal celebrations. In a wedding, the bride and groom may wear special shell ornaments made by family members. These pieces are not just for decoration but also for blessings. They are believed to bring peace, happiness, and good fortune to the new couple. In other festivals, community members wear matching ornaments to show unity and cultural pride.

Dances and music events often include shell ornaments that make sound when the person moves. These ornaments are tied to the arms, waist, or legs. As the dancer moves, the shells create a rhythmic sound that adds to the music. This connection between movement, sound, and shells shows how the ornaments are part of storytelling and expression in tribal performances.

Shell ornaments are also linked to age and gender. Children may wear small and simple shell ornaments, often given by parents or elders. As they grow older, they begin to wear more detailed and meaningful pieces. For men and women, there are different styles and symbols. For instance, women may wear shells shaped like flowers, stars, or circles, while men might wear rougher or stronger-looking designs. These differences help show the role and position of each person in the community.

Many traditional stories are connected to shells and shell ornaments. Elders often tell tales about how shells were gifts from the sea or how they protected ancestors during hard times. Some stories explain how

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Chapter 5: Role in Economy and Livelihood

Shell ornament making plays a very important role in the economy and daily life of many people in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. For local communities, especially those living near the coast, this traditional craft is not just a cultural activity but also a major way to earn a living. Over the years, as tourism has increased, the demand for shell ornaments has grown. Today, tourism is one of the main reasons why many families continue to make and sell shell ornaments.

Most of the shell ornaments are handmade by local artisans who collect shells from the beaches. These artisans, many of whom are women, create necklaces, earrings, bangles, anklets, and other decorative items. The work is done using simple tools, and the skills are often passed down from older generations. In many villages, this work is done at home, where family members work together. This allows people, especially women, to earn income while also taking care of their families.

Tourists who visit the islands are usually very interested in buying items that are made locally. Shell ornaments are one of the most popular choices because they are light, easy to carry, affordable, and beautiful. Many tourists like to take them home as souvenirs, while others buy them as gifts. This creates a steady demand for the ornaments, especially during tourist seasons. Local markets, craft fairs, and even small roadside stalls sell these ornaments, bringing regular income to the people involved.

In recent years, some NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) and government departments have started supporting local artisans. They provide training in better techniques, offer tools and materials, and help organize exhibitions and sales events. This support helps artisans improve their products and reach bigger markets. Some artisans have even begun selling their products online or through eco-tourism centers. These steps have helped increase earnings and bring more recognition to their work.

Shell ornament making also provides employment in related areas. People are involved in collecting, cleaning, sorting, and polishing shells. Others help in packaging and selling. Small groups or cooperatives sometimes work together to make the production process more organized. This creates a network of workers, all depending on this traditional craft for their income.

However, there are also challenges. The rise in tourism has increased the demand for shells, and this sometimes leads to over-collection from beaches and the sea. This can harm marine life and the environment. Also, some shops sell machine-made or factory-produced ornaments that look similar but are cheaper. This affects the earnings of local artisans who work by hand. In some cases, middlemen or shop owners take a big share of the profits, leaving little for the actual makers.

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Chapter 6: Impact of Modernization and Tourism

Modernization and tourism have brought many changes to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These changes have affected the traditional art of shell ornament making in both good and bad ways. While tourism has increased the demand for shell ornaments and helped artisans earn income, modernization has also brought challenges to the traditional way of life and the environment.

One of the positive effects of tourism is the increased visibility of local crafts. Tourists are often interested in buying handmade items that are unique to the place they visit. Shell ornaments made by local artisans attract many visitors because of their beauty and cultural value. As more tourists come to the islands, more people learn about the craft, which helps in keeping the tradition alive. It also creates job opportunities and brings income to many families who depend on this work.

Tourism has also encouraged some artisans to improve their skills and designs. Many have started to use new tools and techniques to make better-quality ornaments. They now experiment with new shapes, colors, and styles that appeal to modern buyers. This change has helped artisans sell their products not just to tourists but also in city markets and through online platforms. Some even get invited to exhibitions and fairs outside the islands to show and sell their work.

However, modernization has also brought some negative effects. One major concern is the overuse of natural resources. As the demand for shell ornaments grows, more shells are collected from the sea and beaches. This can harm marine life and upset the balance of the environment. If shells are taken in large numbers or collected while still alive, it can damage the natural beauty and health of the islands.

Another challenge is the loss of traditional designs and methods. To match modern tastes, some artisans have started copying machine-made products or using artificial materials. These changes may help sell more products, but they also lead to a loss of cultural identity. Young people, influenced by modern trends, may not feel interested in learning the traditional ways of shell ornament making. This puts the future of the craft at risk.

With modernization, many people are also moving to other jobs, especially in the tourism or service sectors. Shell ornament making, which requires patience and skill, may seem less attractive compared to jobs that offer faster income. As a result, fewer young people are taking up the craft, and the knowledge that once passed from generation to generation is slowly disappearing.

There is also the problem of competition from cheap, factory-made ornaments. These look similar to handmade ones but are made quickly in large numbers and sold at lower prices. Tourists who are not aware of the difference may buy the cheaper ones, which affects the earnings of true artisans. This can be very discouraging for local makers who put hard work into their products.

To protect the craft, there are some efforts being made. Schools and cultural centers are trying to teach children about traditional arts and crafts. Workshops are being held to train young artisans and help them improve their skills. NGOs and government programs are also promoting eco-friendly practices, like collecting only empty shells and protecting marine life. These actions are important to keep both the environment and the culture safe.

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Paragraphs	10
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Chapter 7: Preservation and Promotion of the Craft

Shell ornament making is a traditional art that has been part of the culture of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for many years. But due to modernization and environmental challenges, this craft is slowly disappearing. To protect and promote this valuable tradition, many steps are needed. These efforts can help ensure that future generations continue to learn, respect, and practice this beautiful form of handmade art.

One of the most important steps in preserving the craft is creating awareness among young people. Many young members of the island communities are not learning the traditional methods of shell ornament making. They often move toward modern jobs and do not see this craft as valuable. Schools and community centers can help by teaching students about their own culture and traditional crafts. Workshops, craft classes, and storytelling from elders can create interest among the youth and help pass on the skills.

Education plays a key role not just in learning the craft, but also in understanding how it connects to culture, nature, and history. If young people are taught the meaning and value of shell ornaments, they are more likely to continue the practice. They can also learn to mix tradition with modern design ideas, creating new products that attract both local and global markets.

Another way to promote the craft is through museums, cultural festivals, and exhibitions. These events allow artisans to showcase their work and share their stories. Cultural programs that include traditional dance, music, and crafts help create pride in local identity. Tourists and visitors can also learn more about the background of shell ornament making and understand why it is important to preserve it. Museums can display old designs, tools, and photographs to show the history and journey of the craft.

Government and non-government organizations (NGOs) can also support this tradition by giving financial aid, training programs, and platforms to sell handmade items. They can help artisans get access to better tools and materials, and also teach them marketing and business skills. By setting up small cooperative groups or self-help groups, artisans can work together, share resources, and improve their earnings. Government departments can also offer special certificates or labels to products that are handmade and eco-friendly. This helps buyers recognize the value of traditional work.

Sustainable shell collection is another important step. To protect the environment, artisans and shell collectors must be trained to collect shells in ways that do not harm marine life. Collecting only empty or broken shells and avoiding live collection is a responsible practice. This not only protects nature but also helps keep the craft alive without causing damage to the ecosystem. Local laws and guidelines should be followed to ensure that shell collection does not become harmful.